
**Existential Predicament of Alienation in Eugene O'Neill's
*Before Breakfast and Recklessness***

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Abstract: After the two World Wars the social environment is surcharged with the harrowing feeling of alienation and loneliness due to the traumatic repercussions of these wars. People have been striving for the ultimate meaning of their existence on earth. This feeling of isolation and loneliness can be easily discernable in the literary works, particularly in dramas of America produced during the post-World Wars. Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee, the prominent American dramatists of post-World Wars period gave vent to the feeling of alienation of the people who are suffering from a sense of uncertainty and insecurity. All these playwrights deal with the theme of quest for identity in some form or the other. In the plays of Eugene O'Neill, however, this theme has become almost an obsession, a 'force' that seems to dominate all the other aspects of life. A careful study of his full-length plays *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941), *Beyond the Horizon* (1918), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1921), *All God's Chillum Got Wings* (1923) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* reveals that the dominant theme of his plays is isolation and loneliness. His characters are searching for the meaning of their existence on earth and consequently they find themselves pushed into the abysmal depth of loneliness. This paper is an attempt to bring about this theme of alienation in his one act plays *Before Breakfast and Recklessness*.

Key words: Existentialism, alienation, loneliness, predicament, estrangement, disillusionment.

Introduction: American dramas of the period are the offshoot of political, social, economic, and cultural changes taking place in the 20th century. Pursuit of material success and the consequent feelings of detachment led the Americans to disorientation and dislocation even within the society. These changing tendencies of the society led the dramatists to use the techniques of escapism, alienation, loneliness, fantasy, illusion, disillusion in order to bring to the surface the very mentality and propensity of American society and culture, and its ways of living, believing and thinking. American people were very fond of comfortable life. They never involved themselves in the matters of others and didn't like the involvement of

others in their own. But financial depression of 1929, the catastrophe of the two world wars and American's involvement in the world-politics proved a turning point in their life leaving the lasting impression on the American consciousness and disturbing their comfortable life. These events created among people the feelings of disillusionment and loss of faith leading to the sense of frustration, rootlessness, loneliness, hopelessness and sexual hedonism. American dramatists of the time were exploring the American consciousness and psyche. It is their wayward life and unruly manners that the American dramatists of that period tried to depict in their dramas with a realistic approach. These devastating events affected not only America but also the whole world. Bertrand Russell delineates the picture of the pathetic plight of the modern man in general in touching terms:

We stand on the shore of an ocean crying to the night and emptiness. Sometimes a voice answers out of the darkness. But it is a voice of one drowning and in a moment the silence returns. The world seems to be quite dreadful. The unhappiness of most people is very great and I often wonder how they will endure it. To know people well is to know their tragedy. It usually is the central thing about which their lives are built. And I suppose if they did not live most of the time in the things of the moment, they would not be able to go on. (Bertrand Russell, 329-30)

Besides the environment of disillusionment and frustration of the period Eugene O'Neill's hereditary conditions were also conducive to environment he created in his dramas. His parents Ella and James O'Neill were Irish emigrants to America and devout Catholic. In temperament both of them were alien to each other and there was no feeling of understanding between them. Besides this the Irish have some distinct Irishness in their personality that makes them different from other immigrants in America. Raleigh rightly notices that "unlike other groups of immigrants, the Irish in America were not merged in one or two generations." (127) consequently a sense of alienation and loneliness runs through O'Neill's life and works. According to Carpenter "The experience of Irishness common to the O'Neill's family and the feelings of alienation that went with it were typical of twentieth century America but comparatively rare in the earlier America of Emerson and Whiteman's time. By the 1900, the Yankee society of New England had crystallized into a self conscious middle-class culture to which the later immigrants felt themselves alien." (25) O'Neill proved to be the champion of this tragic spirit in the modern American literature in his dramas. In the last phase of his life he also became an alienated and tragic entity. When, in invalid condition, he found himself unable to work, Eugene O'Neill, an eminent personality surrounded by his admirers, yearned for his death, seeing no one with him except his doctor, a nurse, and his third wife, Carlotta Monterey. O'Neill died as broken and tragic a figure just like his tragic character he had created for the stage.

Many of the dramatists, who are not associated with the existentialism, portray the characters who are haunted with a sense of insecurity and isolation. Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and Strindberg ((1849-1912)), the leading figures of the 19th century drama and pioneers of modern realistic drama left an ineffaceable impression on the personality of

Eugene O'Neill. Henrik Ibsen depicted the marginalized situation of his women characters who sometimes feel alienated and isolated in the accompaniment of the domineering personality of their male counterpart in the patriarchal society which deprives them of their social existence. Simone De Beauvoir (1908-1946) who is associated with Feminist Existentialism also asserts that women have potential to uplift themselves from the essences created by society and create their own essence by their freedom of choice like men. The atmosphere of the later 19th and 20th century was surcharged with the question of men or women's existence as an individual. Like Strindberg, who searched into the psychological crisis of his characters, Eugene O'Neill also delved into labyrinths of the psychology of his characters who are in constant effort to understand the meaning and value of their existence in the society. Eugene O'Neill tries to pin point this internal predicament of his characters and this is the main cause of their alienation. A careful study of the plays of Eugene O'Neill and his contemporary dramatists Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller reveals that the theme of isolation and loneliness is one of the recurring themes in their plays. All these playwrights deal with the theme of quest for identity in some form or the other. In the plays of Eugene O'Neill, however, this theme has become almost an obsession, a 'force' that seems to dominate all the other aspects of life. His characters are obsessed with the feeling of isolation and of 'not belonging'. Almost every one of the major characters of O'Neill cherishes a dream or a hankering for the ideal that does not belong to the reality of life. Their dreams not only remain unfulfilled but also become a source of suffering and tragedy leading them to alienation and disorientation. From the beginning, O'Neill was interested in the inner drama of his characters more than their physical or social world. By probing into the internal crisis, which goes on in the mind of his characters, Eugene O'Neill tries to bring on surface the internal conditions of his characters. He depicts the wayward life of his characters living in their own world far away from the seamy side of the world. To shun the painful and crushing situation of life, they escape from the world of reality into the world of illusion. Naturally they make themselves distant from their self, social participation and sometimes from the physical world. They feel estranged in the world even among their peers. This denial of the reality makes them fall the victim of illusion which leads them towards frustration and alienation.

As O'Neill was deeply interested in existential questions of alienation and search for identity, the main theme of his plays is man's struggle to understand his place and identity in the universe. O'Neill deals with different forms of isolation such as social, cultural and personal isolation. In his plays the individuals are estranged from one another on different levels. Communication, compatibility and feeling of co-existence in their lives are substituted by estrangement and hostility. There comes a state when he becomes isolated and estranged not only from others but also from himself. It is really shocking when a person feels stranger and loner in the company of those with whom he intensely wants to live with a sense of belongingness. The characters of O'Neill are often day dreamers, haunted by memory and desire. Failure of their dreams often results in further alienation and frustration. Yank in *The Hairy Ape* ends his life in the process of searching his identity and a realm to which he can "belong".

A number of critics and researchers have raked their pens in exploring the theme of alienation in his full length plays but in this paper an attempt has been made to explore the theme of existential crisis of loneliness and isolation in his one act plays: *Before Breakfast* (1916) and *Recklessness* (1913). O'Neill's concern with his fear of emptiness and loneliness had been manifest even in his early play *The Thirst* (1913) which is placed in the category of his early one act plays. According to existentialism a man in this universe is free to choose his course of action and life and he himself is responsible for his fortune or misfortune, happiness or sufferings. According to Random House Webster's College Dictionary, it is "A philosophical movement, esp. of the 20th century that stresses the individual's position as a self-determining agent responsible for his or her own choices." In his one act play *Before Breakfast* Mrs. Rowland and her husband Alfred are themselves responsible for their alienation and isolation. The play is the delineation of their mutual incompatibility and strained relationship although both of them marry by their own choice. Even the setting of the play reveals that the inmates of the house not interested in maintaining their household because "several potted plants are dying of neglect" (81) and "this place is in a continual muss." (83) Even the appearance of Mrs. Rowland, the leading female character of the play, reflects that besides being indifferent to her household, she does not also take care of her get-up properly as hers "is slovenly toilet" and her hair "is bunched up in a drab-colored mass" (81). She seems to be totally estranged not only to her household and her household but to herself. It is the morning time when the play opens but Mrs. Rowland, instead of taking tea or other refreshment, takes "the large dose of alcohol." Both husband and wife are strangers to each other devoid of any emotional bond between them. It is more shocking that both of them feel alienated and isolated living even under the same roof and sharing the same room. There is total breakdown of meaningful communication and mutual understanding between them. There is an utter emotional barrenness and loneliness in their lives. Alfred, the male character of the play, is equally not at home in his house. It is late in the morning but he is still in his bed. When Mrs. Rowland calls him to awake, "There is a muffled, yawning groan from the next room." (83) The following speech of Mrs. Rowland reveals the extent of frustration and anguish she is going through and the incessant grudge she has against her husband:

Don't you think it's about time you got up? Do you want to stay in bed all day? (*Turning around and coming back to her chair*) Not that I've got any doubts about your being lazy enough to stay in bed forever. (*She sits down and looks out of the window, irritably*). Goodness knows what time it is. We haven't even got any way of telling the time since you your watch like a fool. The last valuable thing we had , and you knew it. It's been nothing but pawn, pawn, pawn, with you – anything to put off getting a job, anything to get out of going to work like a man. (*She taps the floor with her foot nervously, biting her lips*). (83)

Mrs. Rowland constantly tries to belong to the materialistic society which is always obsessed with the rat-race of material success. But lack of sufficient income-resources of her

and that of her husband fosters in her a sense of frustration and consequent alienation. This sense of rudderlessness and disorientation in her contributes a lot to make her irritating, nagging and ill-tempered. That is why there is not a single exchange of affectionate words between them that show an emotional alienation of them both. Like so many other characters of O'Neill's plays, particularly of his early plays including his one act plays, Alfred is a day dreamer. He keeps on soaring high in the sky of ideal dream and never tries to fix his feet on the solid ground of reality. He wastes his valuable time playing in the company of "gentlemen and loaf around barrooms with that good-for-nothing lot of artists from the Square." (83) His unfulfilled dreams create in him the feelings of frustration and alienation. It is to be noted that Alfred's presence in the play is only indicated; he never makes any physical appearance in the play. It is indicated that he is always present in the room; he neither comes out of the room nor gives any response to his wife's harsh words. It is through Mrs. Rowland that we come to know of his presence. His invisible presence without any participation in the conversation further strengthens the sense of frustration, rootlessness, disorientation and alienation in him. It is Alfred's helplessness and disappointment that lead him to always remain under the influence of heavy drink to keep himself unconscious of his alienation and dislocation. Mrs. Rowland very tauntingly says:

Look at your hand tremble. You'd better give up drinking. You can't stand it. It's just your kinds that get the DTs. That would be the last straw! (*Looking down at the door*) Look at the mess you've made of this floor – cigarette butts and ashes all over the place. (85)

The gap of misunderstanding, indifference and estrangement from each other is further widened when Alfred Rowland's extra-marital affair is exposed through the letter Mrs. Rowland finds in his pocket. Both of them are quite hostile forces to each other. It is O'Neill's technique to represent the closely linked individuals on the two extreme edges of ideology and the result is that the communication and mutual compatibility is replaced by hostility and estrangement. Mrs. Rowland is herself responsible for tragic suffering of alienation and isolation. She undergoes the ordeal of loneliness and disorientation due to the hopeless choice she herself made and her inability to escape from this overwhelming situation. She married him because he was, "the millionaire Rowland's only son, the Harvard graduate, the poet, the catch of the town" (86) But all her hopes and expectations of blissful life are thwarted and she is pushed into the depth of anguish when her husband commits suicide.

Recklessness is the representation of another marginalized woman who is also to great extent responsible for her alienation and hopelessness. Like Mrs. Rowland Mildred, the leading female character of the play, marries an affluent husband, Arthur Baldwin under the pressure of her parents. Arthur Baldwin's seniority to her in age results in the incompatibility between them and a subsequent alienation of both Mildred and Arthur Baldwin from each other. Mildred vents her frustration at the wrong choice that she has made:

It was my kind parents who loved his money. He is so much older than I am and we have nothing in common. Well, I simply don't love him—there's an end to it. And so—being his wife—I hate him!

She feels all the more alienated when she is in the company of her husband. It is shocking to note that the happiest moment for her lies in the absence of her husband and when she is all alone. It is a very appalling situation for a person when she/he does not feel comfortable with the person who is the closest to her. She tells Fred Burgess:

I can't stand this life much longer Fred. These last two weeks while he has been away have been heaven to me but when I think of his coming back tonight—I—I could kill him!

Arthur Baldwin, a prosperous man, who has *“a tall, strikingly voluptuous-looking young woman of about twenty-eight,”* is sitting in his luxurious room that is *“the typical sitting-room of a moderately wealthy man who has but little taste and is but little worried by its absence”*. The isolation and alienation of Arthur is also reflected in his indifferent attitude towards his charming and young wife. He is interested in the activities of *“sporting nature, principally of racing automobiles”*. He is not interested in amorous activities with his wife although he has returned after a gap of two weeks but when she asks him about his car, he responds very enthusiastically *“(enthusiastically) Great! (He drops her hand and takes cigar out of box on table.) I made eighty-six about a week ago. (lights cigar) Ran across eight straight miles of level road—let her out the limit. It's some car all right!”* and goes on talking in details about car, its engine, its tire, steering gear etc. He is so materialistic man that he uses his wife as a thing of entertainment. Like Alfred Rowland of *Before Breakfast* Mildred is also a day dreamer. In spite of all kinds of comfort and luxury provided to her by her husband she develops romance with Fred Burgess, their chauffeur. She seeks affection in her chauffeur in order to escape from the feeling of loneliness and in order to be, “understood.” Both husband and wife are totally estranged to each other and there is no emotional bond that can attract them to each other. Their strained relationship is narrated by Mildred to Fred Burgess:

I'm sure he isn't as mean as all that. To do him justice he's been kind to me—in his way. He has looked upon me as his plaything, the slave of his pleasure, a pretty toy to be exhibited that others might envy him his ownership. But he's given me everything I've ever asked for without a word—more than I ever asked for. He hasn't ever known what the word “husband” ought to mean but he's been a very considerate “owner.”

Instead of seeking emotional shelter in each other both of them engaged themselves in someone or something else; Mildred in extra-marital affair and Arthur Baldwin in ‘racing automobiles’. In their likes and interests they are quite a pole-apart. They don't belong to

each other in any way. They belong to totally different social, cultural and economic background and are consequently frustrated with each other.

Being an existentialist Eugene O'Neill is very authentic and genuine in rendering the picture of his characters but it is the picture not of their external affliction but of an internal predicament which the characters experience even living together as closely associated individuals but their association is only external or physical, not spiritual. Internally or spiritually they are detached from one another a pole-apart. In both of these plays the strained relationship between husband and wife has been reflected. Both the husband and wife belong to different regions. A strange similarity in both these plays is discerned; one of the characters in both the plays belongs to materialistic region and other one is a day dreamer. These different spheres of their interest become the source of their alienation and isolation. In case of *Before Breakfast* Alfred Rowland, the male character, is a day dreamer and his wife Mrs. Rowland belong to mundane considerations while in *Recklessness* Mildred, the female character, is a day dreamer while Arthur Baldwin belongs to arid world of 'racing automobile'. Each one of them feels alienated from other. In these early plays of O'Neill, isolation and loneliness are caused by romantic dreams of the characters whose dreams are not fulfilled hence they are finally frustrated. The situation of alienation and isolation pushes a person concerned to the negative inclination of vulnerability and violence. That is why in both plays the day dreamers, pushed into the abysmal depth of frustration, desperation, alienation and isolation commit suicide.

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